



An Introduction to Lavender

Lavender is a wonderfully fragrant woody perennial; it has over 2,500 years of recorded use as a strewing herb, a mood tonic, a fragrance, an insect repellent, and a food flavoring. Ancient Egyptians used it in the mummification process. Medieval and Renaissance laundresses were called “lavenders” because they used lavender in the storage of clean laundry. The Pilgrims brought the plant to North America in the early 1600s; at that time, lavender flowers sewn in a cap were thought to “comfort the brain very well.”

Varieties of Lavender

There are about 28 species of lavender. Some are hardy in Zones 4-7, while others are tender and best grown in pots in those areas. There is some confusion with common names, so it is always best to check the botanical name when buying lavender.

The most widely grown hardy lavender is *Lavandula angustifolia* (sometimes sold as *L. vera* or *L. officinalis* and often called ‘English’ lavender). There are more than a hundred varieties of *L. angustifolia*, ranging from eight inches to three feet tall, with flowers of white, pink, blue, and purple.

The two most popular varieties are ‘Munstead’ (18 inches tall with lilac-colored flowers) and ‘Hidcote’ (16 inches tall with deep purple-blue flowers). Both have a sweet fragrance and are excellent for drying for crafting. Their blossoms are produced on flower stems eight to 10 inches long. In south-central Pennsylvania, both varieties (and most other *angustifolias*) tend to bloom in June. Willow Pond Farm’s exclusive varieties ‘Madeline Marie,’ ‘Rebecca Kay,’ and ‘Two Amys,’ cultivated by Tom Wajda, also have excellent second blooms in late August.

Another quite hardy species is *L. x intermedia*, also known as *lavandin*. Among the most popular *intermedia* varieties are ‘Grosso,’ ‘Provence,’ ‘White Provence,’ and ‘Grappenhall.’ The result of crosses between *L. angustifolia* and other species, the *intermedias* are usually considerably larger than the *angustifolias* (often 30 inches high with flower stems 18-24 inches long) and tend to have more camphor in their aromas.

Tender varieties include ‘Spanish’ lavender (*Lavendula stoechas*); ‘French’ lavender (*L. dentata*); and ‘Fernleaf’ lavender (*L. multifida*). These tender plants can be grown outside in pots in the summer, and then brought inside to a bright windowsill for the winter. The soil in the pot should contain some sand, perlite, or vermiculite to aid in drainage. Water when soil is dry to the touch and fertilize every three weeks. Spider mites and white flies can be controlled by insecticidal soap; plants should be trimmed in the spring and fall. While these varieties are not as fragrant as hardy lavenders, they will reward you with blooms almost year-round.

Growing Lavender

All lavenders need full sun and good drainage; they are quite drought tolerant. Lavenders like a neutral or slightly alkaline soil (7.0-7.3 pH). For best results, test your soil, adding lime if necessary.

Heavy clay soils need the addition of sand to provide good drainage. Alternatively, plant lavenders on a slightly raised mound. Mulch lavenders with a two-inch layer of sand or white pebbles, which will reflect the sunlight back into the plant and help prevent fungus diseases. Leaving adequate spacing between plants will also help air circulation.

Lavenders benefit from a cover of evergreen branches in the winter and a pruning of not more than one-third of the plant in the spring. Deer do not appear to care for the taste of lavender; in fact, some gardeners plant lavender among other plants as a deterrent to deer.

Propagating Lavender

Lavenders do not necessarily come true from seed; propagation is most successful when done from cuttings or by layering. For a cutting, you will need a three- to four-inch semi-hard (not too green, not too brown) branch. Trim the leaves off the bottom half of the cutting and pinch the top before inserting into a rooting medium—we have excellent results using sand.

Keep the cuttings moist (but not soggy) and in filtered light. They root best at temperatures of 70-75 degrees. Cuttings are best taken from May through mid-August.

Layering can be done in the spring: Bend an outside branch gently to the ground. Leave about six inches of leaves on the growing tip. Wound the stem slightly in the spot where you want roots, pinning that area into the ground; then cover with soil. Stake the remaining branch tip upright and water. If rooted by fall, cut it off from mother plant and leave in place until spring. If not, recheck in the spring.

Harvesting Lavender

Harvest lavender when the first bud on the flower stalk is starting to open. Some varieties, such as 'Hidcote,' keep tightly closed for some time and will allow you seven to 10 days to do your harvesting. Others, such as 'Croxtton Wild,' are completely open in a day or two, which often causes them to lose their blossoms in the drying process. To dry lavender, bind 25-75 stems with a rubber band and hang with a paper clip in a warm, dry, dark spot. When dry, pack away in boxes or plastic bags for craft projects or culinary use.

Cooking with Lavender

Most people are familiar with the use of lavender in decorating or bath and body products; however, cooking with the flowers can also add a very interesting and complex flavor to foods. Although fresh and dried lavender can be used in place of one another in most recipes, the sweet, perfumed nature of fresh lavender flowers seems particularly appropriate in desserts. While also good in sweets, dried lavender flowers tend to have a somewhat more herbal taste—somewhat like thyme or marjoram—and can be combined with other herbs and spices for more savory uses, such as marinating meats, chicken, and fish.

Lavender is also a key ingredient in Herbes de Provence, a Mediterranean herbal blend used to season soups, vegetables, and meats.